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# Betraying The Contras

Halfway measures by an administration lacking the will to win are leading to this tragic turn in the fight against Central American communism: betrayal by political posturing in Washington of Nicaragua's anti-Marxist *contras*.

Murky charges float around Capitol Hill that last week's political maelstrom was started by highly placed career officers in the Central Intelligence Agency who always had opposed Director William Casey's anti-Sandinista campaign in general and mining Nicaragua's ports in particular.

In truth, however, retreat was started elsewhere—by the Republican leaders in the Senate. Seeking vainly to defuse the issue, and pressed to do so by the White House, they joined liberal senators instead of fighting them.

Thus can be glimpsed the end of an anti-Sandinista policy in Nicaragua that was too cautious from the start. Ronald Reagan now finds himself on the brink of a foreign debacle dwarfing the Lebanon fiasco, endangering his foreign policy and his reelection.

An attempt by the president to mobilize the nation may be necessary to avert a congressional cutoff of funds.

Unless third-nation backing (Israel or Saudia Arabia is mentioned) can be found or token U.S. financing maintained, communist control in Nicaragua will be confirmed.

Playing cute politics last week ended the administration's chances to shape a dramatic up-or-down vote on Nicaragua. That test would have created an election-year contest between a resolute Reagan, willing to take risks to save Central America, and a divided Democratic Party whose neo-isolationist wing abjures the use of force against revolutionary Marxism. Such an election-year issue would at least give voters a chance to choose.

Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker set the stage for the mass Republican backdown on the port-mining issue. Addressing a closed-door Senate Republican conference April 10 (with an unusually high attendance of nearly 50 senators), Baker called for a show of hands on this question: How many support Sen. Edward Kennedy's resolution to cut off all aid for the mining?

Counting 16 hands, Baker told his colleagues that much support would guarantee Kennedy's winning. Rather than court humiliating defeat for the president, he said, better for the Republicans to "defuse" the issue by joining Kennedy. Yet, a shrewdly managed battle against the resolution conceivably might have won in the Senate. Instead, moderate Democrats were freed by the Republican surrender to join Kennedy.

Baker's rationale was that since the resolution was non-binding, Kennedy's victory would signify nothing. That ignored screaming headlines and major takeouts on the evening television news. It also ignored the poisonous impact of retreat on other Latin American states.

But the majority leader was in tune with the White House, where chief of staff James Baker III was an architect of the go-with-Teddy strategy. Jim Baker's political priority today is not fighting communists in Central America but devising new ways to shape Reagan as the peace president.

Even before Reagan took the presidential oath, his national security planners had focused on Nicaragua as the obvious place for the new administration to prove its credibility in the East-West struggle. Step by step, however, original plans were shaved and shorn. Published reports of planned mining of Nicaraguan ports appeared as early as July 1983, but nothing happened for months.

When it finally did, the mining was not kept secret from Congress. Members of the Senate and House intelligence committees, now whining about being left in the dark, learned—if they listened—of the mining operation on three separate occasions. Sen. Malcolm Wallop, an attentive Republican on the Intelligence Committee, told us it was "an outright fabrication" for any member to claim otherwise.

The roots of the uproar on Capitol Hill go deeper than Bill Casey's difficulty or unwillingness to communicate with Congress. They go to congressional indifference to the nature and spread of

Marxism in Central America, to members of both parties concerned about the niceties of international law instead of the enemy at the back door.

That mood counts heavily when the White House is more concerned about the president's election-year image than about the future of the *contras*. In contrast, a few deeply concerned senators are urging Reagan to go to the nation. The alternative might be another chapter of betrayal of allies, this time by a president who just four years ago pledged to close the book on such conduct.

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